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PRESS RELEASE

A MEETING ON THE UNIVERSALIZATION OF THE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION CONCLUDES AT THE AU HEADQUARTERS IN ADDIS ABABA

Addis Ababa, 30 October 2015: The Commission of the African Union (AU) organized a two-day meeting of Member States on the universalization of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) in Africa, in collaboration with the Geneva-based Implementation Support Unit of the BWC.

The meeting was organized within the framework of the Common African Defense and Security Policy (CADSP) adopted by the 2nd Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly of Heads of States and Government, in February 2004, and in follow-up to the press release of the Chairperson of the Commission, issued on 26 March 2015, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the entry into force of the BWC.

The objective of the meeting was to enhance understanding of the BWC and its implementation among signatories and non-signatories in order to promote its universality. The meeting discussed a number of related topics, including procedures for ratification of, and accession to, the BWC; national legislative, administrative and enforcement measures; the BWC Confidence Building Measures, advances in science and technology, convergence between biology and chemistry and implications for the BWC; synergies between the BWC and UN Security Council resolution 1540 (2004); and international assistance and cooperation within the framework of the BWC.

The meeting also discussed in depth matters of bio-safety, bio-security and bio-sciences and technology in Africa, as well as the implications and lessons learned from the Ebola Disease Outbreak, including the national and regional measures required to address disease outbreaks and bio-threats.

It should be recalled that the BWC prohibits the development, production, acquisition, transfer, retention, stockpiling and use of biological and toxin weapons. It is one of the three fundamental pillars of the international community's effort against weapons of mass destruction along with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention. Globally, 171 States are Party to the BWC, 39 of which are AU Member States.



NOTE TO THE EDITORS

About the BWC

The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, commonly known as the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), opened for signature in 1972 and entered into force in 1975. The BWC prohibits the development, production, acquisition, transfer, retention, stockpiling and use of biological and toxin weapons.

The BWC is one of the three fundamental pillars of the international community's effort against weapons of mass destruction along with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention. The BWC also complements United Nations Security Council resolution 1540, which aims to prevent the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and their means of delivery to non-state actors.

Biological weapons can be used to attack humans, but also livestock and crops. The economic effects can be devastating. All states are potentially at risk, and all can benefit from joining the BWC. Compared to other weapons of mass destruction, biological weapons are relatively easy to develop, transfer and conceal. The struggle against them must therefore be shared across the international community, and needs to involve the security, scientific, public health, and agricultural sectors.

There is a growing risk that biological weapons may be obtained and used by non-state actors, including terrorist groups. Wider membership of the BWC will ensure there are fewer places where bioterrorists can work with impunity. Joining the BWC is a step all states can take to help reduce the threat of terrorism.

Universal membership of the BWC will strengthen the global norm against the use of disease as a weapon, reinforcing the international community's determination that such use would be, as the preamble to the BWC states, "repugnant to the conscience of mankind".

The BWC supports the development of the peaceful uses of biological science and technology. Article X of the BWC requires States Parties to "facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information", for the use of biological agents and toxins for peaceful purposes.

About the AU's role in regional disarmament and nonproliferation

The Common African Defense and Security Policy (CADSP), adopted by the 2nd Extra Ordinary Summit of the AU on 28 February 2004, recognizes that the accumulation, stockpiling, proliferation and manufacturing of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and their means

of delivery, pose a threat to regional security and call for collective efforts by Member States to address their threat. The CADSP therefore mandates the relevant AU organs to promote and encourage the implementation of the regional and international conventions and treaties on arms control and disarmament. Working within this framework, the AU has remained strongly committed to the multilateral disarmament and nonproliferation regimes.

The AU's role is centered on the principle that universal adherence to the disarmament and nonproliferation regimes will serve to strengthen their effectiveness and authority and provide the required transparency and confidence-building measures. This would consequently ensure that regional and international resources are effectively channeled to enhance international cooperation where all states can equally benefit from the peaceful applications of nuclear, chemical and biological sciences and technology.

In 2002, the Assembly of the Organization of African Unity adopted a decision in which it expressed its commitment to the global chemical weapons disarmament and non-proliferation efforts, supported the call to achieve universality of the Chemical Weapons Convention in Africa and encouraged its full and effective implementation. This position was reaffirmed by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, in 2006, between the AU Commission and the Technical Secretariat of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The Memorandum aims to establish an effective mechanism for collaboration and joint action between the Commission and the OPCW in assisting States Parties meet their obligations under the Convention, as well as benefit from the peaceful use of chemistry for industrial and socio-economic development.

The AU has also taken steps to advance the implementation of the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Pelindaba). In this regard, the AU Commission is working towards the timely and effective operationalization of the African Commission on Nuclear Energy (AFCON) established by the Treaty of Pelindaba and mandated to monitor states parties' compliance with their obligations, as well as to promote the peaceful applications of nuclear science and technology.

In January 2013, the 20th Summit of the Assembly of the Union, held in January 2013, adopted a decision requesting the AU Commission to take all necessary steps, in collaboration with the 1540 Committee and the relevant partners, to support Member States in their efforts in the implementation of the resolution. The AU has since taken a number of important initiatives, including the organization of sensitization workshops and trainings for the national points of contact designated by Member States pursuant to the resolution. The AU is also working closely with the 1540 Committee and the relevant regional and international partners towards organizing an assistance conference in early 2016.

The AU is also actively engaged in conventional arms control issues. As early as 2000, the AU adopted the Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons in preparation for the UN Conference which adopted the UN programme of Action.

More recently, the AU adopted, in 2013, the AU Strategy and Action Plan on the Control of the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons. The Strategy and Action Plan outline the roles of the AU, the Regional Economic Communities and Regional Bodies with a Small Arms mandate, and the Member States, which must all work together in a coordinated and reinforcing manner towards a continental, sustainable and effective approach to addressing illicit small arms.

The Strategy was adopted in tandem with the African Common Position on the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) which formed the reference for Member States that have participated in the final UN Conference. This common position was based on the principles of the recognition of the full responsibility of all States to regulate the manufacture and transfer of conventional arms in their simultaneous and changing roles as exporters or importers; the prohibition to transfer conventional arms, including SALW to unauthorized non-State armed groups and/or unauthorized non-State actors; the obligation and accountability of all States to fully comply with UN Security Council and AU Peace Security Council arms embargoes; and the respect for international law, including international human rights law and international humanitarian law. The AU continues to sensitize Member States on the ATT and promote its universality.

In the area of mine action, and since 1995, the OAU/AU launched a number of initiatives aimed at addressing the scourge of anti-personnel landmines and other explosive remnants of war. These initiatives include the Kempton Park Plan of Action adopted by the First Continental Conference of African Experts on Landmines, held from 19 to 21 May 1997. This was followed by the African Common Position on anti-personnel mines, adopted in preparation to the First Review Conference of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) which took place in late 2004.

In April 2014 the Commission launched the Mine Action and Explosive Remnants of War Strategic Framework project Document for the period 2014 to 2017. The objective of the Strategic Framework is to support AU Member States in reducing the threat posed by conventional weapons, mines, explosive remnants of war, cluster munitions and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in accordance with the relevant international instruments and best practices. The Strategic Framework promotes the concept of national ownership and recognizes that while substantial regional and international support and assistance is required, national governments hold the primary responsibility for developing and implementing mine action and explosive hazard management programs.

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A Meeting on the Universalization of the Biological Weapons Convention Concludes At the Au Headquarters in Addis Ababa

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